

Mayor's Column for the March 16, 2011 Review

I received feedback from several people responding to my late-February mayor's column addressing the state government legislative impacts on our community. One resident was appalled by part of my article and he stated that "public employee unions were illegal." Another resident gave me a hug as I arrived at the Golf Course for a Friday night fish fry, thanking me for writing a needed article. I got a thank you note in the mail from a citizen. Other individuals commented in e-mails or at community events I attended.

In that column, I indicated continued willingness to talk about concerns and issues, and I have been hearing from you. I have heard words of uncertainty, angst, worry, despair, anger, excitement, and satisfaction in recent conversations.

Two weeks ago I was in Washington D.C. attending the American Public Power Association Legislative Rally with a delegation of over fifty Wisconsin local elected officials and utility managers and commissioners. (I had intended to report on the Rally in this article; I will do so in the near future.) As I crossed Capitol Hill to attend a meeting with Senator Kohl, I passed the U.S. Supreme Court Building. There were protesters on the steps of the Building. Watching the news in our hotel room that evening, I learned that the Court had issued a ruling on a controversial free speech case involving war picketers at funerals of our military killed in the line of duty. The Court upheld the right of free speech even when it's ugly.

The D.C. news was filled with stories of the rallies and protests in Madison. I was proud of the peaceful, committed crowds of varying minds exercising their right to be heard.

Our local government takes citizen speech very seriously. There is an agenda item for citizen comments at all Common Council meetings. Public hearings are often scheduled on important matters even when not legally required. If a snafu occurs and open meetings law requirements are not met, city meetings are rescheduled. Much effort is undertaken to keep the city website current. Alders often bring up concerns raised by citizens at committee meetings. City Hall has an open door policy. You are welcome to contact me at 882-2266 or sandy.decker@ci.evansville.wi.gov. Our City Administrator has repeatedly stated that he is more than willing to discuss citizen issues.

Members of the Common Council and I have been asked why we don't advocate for a certain political position in the current state debate. I will explain my personal view. I am not speaking for the Common Council. Local elected officials in Wisconsin are non-partisan. Local government services like garbage collection, public safety, park maintenance, street plowing, and, in Evansville, electricity distribution and cemetery care, are determined to best be provided free of political ideology. As your mayor, I see my job as providing the best possible services and maximizing our quality of life while securing the best fiscal present and future for our community. Local elections provide the opportunity to address dissatisfaction with services or administration.

As I indicated at the beginning of this column, there are differing local viewpoints on the state political situation. What position represents Evansville? Do I have a personal opinion? You bet. However, my viewpoint is not necessarily that of our community. Evansville citizens can best advocate their individual political positions. I can best represent Evansville by making sure our community stays strong and on course through political controversy and uncertainty.

Our City is active in local government legislative advocacy. Alderpersons, city staff, and the mayor have participated for years in the League of Wisconsin Municipalities Lobbying Corps, held three-four times a year. Unfunded mandates, bureaucratic red tape, and costs of service are examples of issues of local concern. I was recently appointed to the League Advisory Committee on Legislation, which met in January to discuss the first legislative proposals of the Walker Administration. I have participated in the APPA Legislative Rally, promoting the interests of municipal utilities, for several years. Evansville has been represented at the joint Municipal Electric Utilities of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Rural Water Association Day at the state Capitol. We have maintained good relationships and communications with our state legislators, Senator Jon Erpenbach and Representative Janis Ringhand. We had a good working relationship with former Representative Brett Davis. We maintain regular contact with Wisconsin staff for Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin and Senator Kohl, and had contacts with former Senator Feingold's office. Senator Johnson is currently building his staff organization. Mary Beaver, our EMS Coordinator, is on the Rock County Board, including the County Finance Committee.

Some of our residents continue to be concerned about the fiscal strength of our community. The oft-repeated message from Madison is that local governments needed the budget repair bill to handle their budgets. There are municipalities in dire straits. An alderperson from one Wisconsin community recently told me they are near bankruptcy, maxed out on general obligation debt, with few remaining financial options. A council member from another city said they need to plug a million dollar gap in next year's budget and the repair bill will help them. Let me state again—Evansville is in strong financial shape. We cut expenses throughout the recession. We have eliminated some part-time staff. We have postponed some capital investments. We have a healthy fund balance and we have been conservative in using debt. With a sharp pencil we will be able to address the state revenue cuts.

Residents have asked about the loss of state recycling funds. The state grant was in the range of \$25,000 for Evansville. While eliminating the funding, state recycling requirements were not changed. While the Common Council has not yet discussed this situation, it is highly likely that recycling service will continue. Trash and recycling costs are a separate fee collected on property tax bills. In 2010 the annual charge was \$121.50 per household. The added recycling cost would increase the annual charge around \$14 (approximately \$1.25/month).

Wisconsiners should expect Voter ID legislation. One proposed change is that the photo identification must have the correct address. If you have moved and have the blue address

change attached to your drivers license, it may no longer be acceptable. Student IDs would no longer be acceptable. A residency requirement of 28 days instead of 10 days is proposed. This will increase the number of absentee ballots and there will be additional requirements for voter identification by absentee voters. Citizens have a new awareness of the importance of elections. Do not be surprised by changing voting requirements. We will pass along information as we receive it. Please stay informed!

The current environment in Wisconsin is very emotional and highly-charged. I can see it in everyday dealings with people. I know that many parents are using this experience to discuss citizenship and its rights and responsibilities in their families. Please reassure your children. Our youth are sensitive to the emotional turmoil of adults and need extra support and care.

We are a close-knit community. Accepting diversity of opinions will grow our community. Reinforcing divisiveness weakens us. We must be role models for our youth; it is in our best interest.

Community Announcements

The U.S. Census results were released last week. The City of Evansville 2010 official population is 5,012, an increase of 24.1% from 2000. We are the fastest growing community in Rock County.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

Last week more than 50 people attended the community supper and discussion on underage drinking and prescription drug abuse in Evansville. I thank these citizens for taking time to participate in the evening's activities.